



## Climate change driving displacement, says UN refugee chief



Drought leaves this land barren in northern Afghanistan

16 December 2009 – Climate change is the biggest factor driving forced displacement, a top United Nations official said today, underscoring that global warming is blurring the traditional distinction between refugees and migrants.

“Climate change is, in my opinion, the most important trigger and the most important enhancer of forced displacement” that is interconnected with other “mega-trends,” such as food insecurity, poverty and conflict,” UN High Commissioner for Refugees (**UNHCR**) António Guterres told reporters in Copenhagen, Denmark, today.

Nations are hammering out a new climate change agreement in the Danish capital at the historic UN conference, which is set to wrap up on Friday.

Climate change, Mr. Guterres said today, is making natural disasters more intense and frequent, and is also threatening the future of countries, not just small island nations, due to rising sea levels.

It can also set off violence, he pointed out, with resources becoming scarcer and resulting in competition, “which can lead to conflict and conflict will lead to displacement.”

Traditionally, refugees have been seen as people who flee their home country due to war or persecution, while migrants have been seen as people moving to a different nation in search of a better life.

“Now this distinction is becoming more and more blurred because a combination of factors – climate change, food insecurity, poverty, conflict – are becoming more and more interlinked and forcing people to flee,” Mr. Guterres stressed.

Under the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee was defined as a person having “a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion.”

A new treaty was promulgated in October in Africa to protect and assist those uprooted from their homes due to conflict and natural disasters in Africa, which accounts for nearly half of the world’s 26 million internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The High Commissioner today called on nations to discuss on how to protect people worldwide not covered under the 1951 Convention and “to address questions of statelessness, namely sinking islands, in which the problem is not only to give a nationality to someone, but to preserve the identity, culture and the history of a population.”

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